

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE & FISHERIES
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Waterfowl Population Estimates
in Louisiana's Coastal Zone Below
U.S. Highway 90 and on Catahoula Lake

Date: Coastal Zone: December 10-12, 2007
Catahoula Lake: December 5, 2007
Northeast LA: December 5, 2007
Scaup survey: December 10, 2007

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Estimates made from Aircraft (**) Estimate less than 1,000

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	106,000	6,000	16,000	128,000
MOTTLED	40,000	31,000		71,000
GADWALL	259,000	171,000	3,000	433,000
WIGEON	11,000	18,000	1,000	30,000
GW TEAL	227,000	11,000	1,000	239,000
BW TEAL	189,000	46,000	**	235,000
SHOVELER	95,000	12,000	1,000	108,000
PINTAIL	56,000	295,000	47,000	398,000
TOTAL DABLERS	983,000	590,000	69,000	1,642,000
SCAUP	2,000	10,000		12,000
RINGNECKED	80,000	195,000	15,000	290,000
CANVASBACK			58,000	58,000
TOTAL DIVERS	82,000	205,000	73,000	360,000
TOTAL DUCKS	1,065,000	795,000	142,000	2,002,000
COOTS	359,000	393,000		752,000

COMMENTS:

The estimate of 2.0 million ducks on this survey is 25% higher than November's estimate of 1.6 million, but is 13% below the 5-year December average of 2.3 million and 30% below the long-term December average of 2.9 million. The number of dabbling ducks was about the same as in November with large increases in mallards and pintails balanced by a big drop in blue-winged teal and more modest declines in the number of gadwalls, green-winged teal, and shovelers. Although 220,000 fewer than in November, the 235,000 bluewings estimated from this survey is over twice the long-term December average. In contrast, the 128,000 estimated mallards is over 100,000 higher than in November, but is just over 1/3 of the long-term December average. Gadwall, wigeon, and green-winged teal estimates were below long-term average, while estimates for mottled ducks, shovelers, and pintails were at or near long-term average. The number of diving ducks increased from 51,000 in November to 360,000 on this survey mostly due to a big influx of ring-necked ducks in southeast Louisiana and canvasbacks at Catahoula Lake. Those species are above their long-term December averages, but scaup are well below.

The distribution of ducks on this survey was not as skewed toward southwest Louisiana as we have seen since January 2006. About 43% of the total ducks were counted in southeast Louisiana compared to only 10% in November. Far fewer bluewings in southwest Louisiana along with big increases in ring-necked ducks and especially pintails in southeast Louisiana were largely responsible for the change in distribution. Large concentrations of pintails were seen on the Atchafalaya and Mississippi river deltas while many ringnecks had moved into the Terrebonne Basin marshes compared to the November survey. In southwest Louisiana, ducks were less concentrated than in November but the marshes from Calcasieu Lake to White Lake and flooded agricultural fields to the north held strong numbers gadwalls, green-winged teal and blue-winged teal along with mallards in some locations.

A combination of poor weather, logistic problems, and mechanical difficulties kept us from completing surveys in northwest and northeast Louisiana. On about half the normally-surveyed area in central and northeast Louisiana, 141,000 ducks and 104,000 geese were counted. That is substantially higher than the 84,000 ducks and 63,000 geese counted on the full survey in November, so there has certainly been a big influx of birds into these habitats during that time. However, with such limited data, no further comparative statements can be made.

In December, LDWF also conducts a scaup survey on Lakes Pontchartrain and Borgne. An estimated 6,000 scaup were seen on Lake Borgne and 4,000 on Lake Pontchartrain. That is far less than the record number (1.2 million) seen on this survey last December and lower than the past 5 years except for the record low of just 1,000 counted in 2005 after hurricane Katrina.

Warm weather conditions and delayed migration were reported in November, but cool fronts during the second week of November and over the Thanksgiving holiday brought more birds into the state and may have sent some bluewings further south. Temperatures since then have been unseasonably warm and not conducive to moving migrating ducks down the flyway. However, severe winter weather is moving across the Great Plains with associated ice-storm warnings and reports of freezing wetlands south into Arkansas creating conditions favorable to increase migrations into Louisiana.

Habitat conditions are much improved in the agricultural areas north of the marsh in

southwest Louisiana. Much more shallow-flooded habitat is available in those areas, and more ducks and far more geese were seen using it. Water levels in the marsh are slightly higher than in November but still excellent for feeding ducks, and the water level at Catahoula Lake has remained within management target levels providing good foraging habitat for dabbling and diving ducks. However, precipitation in central and north Louisiana remains well below average and wetland conditions are typically dry except for managed water. As a result of pumping, there is substantially more shallow-water on the landscape than in November, but there is little natural flooding in the river systems, backwaters, swamps and fields.